

# 21 marketing channels for membership sites



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## Introduction

Determining the best marketing mix for your membership site can feel like an insurmountable feat — especially if marketing and sales aren't in your wheelhouse. Keeping a steady flow of leads coming your way month after month, year after year, in addition to every other task you're required to perform as a membership site owner is a tall task. I'm going to break down the 21 most effective customer acquisition channels for membership websites and tell you how those relate to one another so you can form a cohesive, effective marketing strategy.

Hi, I'm Amanda Northcutt, [The Subscription Coach](#). I help founders of SaaS, subscription, and online membership businesses get their revenue machines running at full strength through coaching, consulting, recruiting, and as a fractional executive. I have 20 years of sales experience and over 15 in online recurring revenue businesses. I hope this Marketing guide helps take your online membership to the next level!

## Working *on* the business

Before we dive in, let's get on the same page about one quick thing: in order to stop spinning your wheels with your membership, you must take the time to work *on* your business and determine what's working and what's not. If you want to be successful, you have to look at your numbers. Otherwise this membership venture of yours will forever remain a hobby and not ever allow you to gain the financial freedom and reward of a fully leveraged business. If you're okay with mediocre, stop reading. If you want to acquire the basic business skills necessary to meet your big, hairy, audacious goals – the ones that scare you with excitement – read on!

## What is a sales/marketing funnel?

The 21 acquisition channels broken down below are all considered "top of funnel" sources. The top of your marketing funnel can be thought of as the big bucket that all of your fresh leads go in. Your email nurture sequence, advertising (like retargeting), etc. helps further narrow those top of funnel leads down to a medium-sized bucket of people who are better qualified to achieve success with your membership offering than the mass of people who first entered your funnel. And finally, those who are sifted even farther through that medium-sized bucket make it all the way to the tiny bucket (bottom of funnel). The prospects in the tiny bucket are your most qualified leads that should be poised to purchase!

As you're reading through this list I want you to consider which 3-6 acquisition channels you are best suited to try first. Then, make a commitment to yourself and to your business to follow the steps below to find the 2 – 4 most viable marketing channels for your membership.

## Determine viability

Once you've chosen the handful you're going to try, you need to find out which channels are most viable for you.

**Your most viable acquisition channels are both profitable** (your CaC MUST be lower than your cLTV or you're dead in the water) **and reliable** (provides a steady stream of leads rather than working once but never again).

CaC stands for customer acquisition cost and is the amount of money it takes to bring on a new member to your site. A simple example is if you run a Facebook campaign for \$2,000 and at the end of the campaign have acquired 20 new members, your CaC was \$100.

CLTV stands for customer lifetime value and is the total amount of money a customer pays you from their first to last transaction on your site. Put simply, if your membership costs \$25/month and the average customer stays with you for 6 months, your cLTV is right at \$150.

Here's how to determine the most viable acquisition channels for your membership:

1. Pick a channel
2. Conduct a simple test
3. Assess your results to see which channels are in fact most viable
4. Repeat until you find the 3-5 most viable channels that will help you scale

Be mindful that the data you collect while running a simple test doesn't always have to be statistically significant to provide valuable insight or at least can act as a starting point from which to build.

## Back to science class for a sec...

Just like elementary school science, your test should have a hypothesis, defined parameters, and a way to assess your results. So, first, make an educated guess on what results you should expect from your marketing test. Second, define the scope of the test. For our purposes that can just include timeline and budget. Lastly, make sure you are able to access success metrics when the test is complete.

A do or die litmus test for a marketing acquisition channel is "can I assess my results when this thing is done, or is this a shot in the dark?" If it's a shot in the dark, there are very few cases in which you should proceed.

**If you pay more for customers than they pay you, your membership business will not last.** The only way to know if you're on the right track is to look at your numbers: run tests with a predetermined budget and timeline, and then assess your results.

Acquisition channels must be both profitable and reliable, and you won't know which ones are unless you run the numbers. While this is at times soul-sucking work, it's foundational to having even moderate success, and absolutely imperative for scaling your membership.

Now that you have a framework for conducting the tests necessary to find the most viable channels for you, let's begin our top 21 list!

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## Chapter 1: Content

Organic search traffic happens when someone finds you on a search engine, like Google. Their ability to find you is determined by your SEO (**search engine optimization**).

Your **SEO** strategy is a marathon, not a sprint, and all of your marketing efforts (especially content!) should be optimized to make your membership more discoverable over time. Here are a few suggestions you can do on your own – no agency or SEO guru required:

First, your overall approach to SEO should be along the lines of “how can I be most helpful to humans who are interested in the topic I publish about?”. If you focus 100% on the latest tricks to move up in the search results, you’ll be chasing a constantly-changing target – and you won’t be serving your audience well. Google (let’s be honest, that’s the only search engine that matters for most purposes) explicitly states that their goal is to surface the most helpful, informative content. Provide great content in a way that makes it easy for real people to find and consume, and you’ll have success long-term.

With that in mind, once someone gets to your site it should be easy for them to find what they’re looking for. So, link blog posts, podcasts, webinars, YouTube videos, etc. to related content. For example, if you’ve created 10 free pieces of content on the same (or closely linked) topic, each one of those content pieces should be linked to the other 9. Yes, this is tedious, but it works for the Google gods (and there are WordPress plugins that make this less painful).

Consistently publishing content in front of the paywall is also key to improving your SEO. As a membership site, you’re likely already creating an incredible amount of content for your paying members. It might seem overwhelming to have to produce even more content to release for free. Get a handle on your free vs. paid content strategy [here](#) to ease your burden.

Working key industry search terms into blog titles and throughout your content is certainly helpful as well. But, don’t under any circumstances sound like a robot. This kind of phrasing can’t be forced. You should sound like you’re writing something meant for another human, and Google will shine favor on you :)

Having long-form blog posts or articles that cover a topic comprehensively in front of the paywall helps as well. If you can create a few ebooks by combining and expanding on topic specific blog posts, more power to you.

At the very least you should be reviewing your Google Analytics and Search Console accounts once per month to track where your traffic is coming from, including organic search results. You can use paid advertising, like Facebook, to promote your most popular content pieces as well. But you can’t make informed campaign decisions like that without *first* looking at the numbers.

Check out [The Beginners Guide to SEO](#) from Moz to learn more.

## Content marketing

Simply put, content marketing is the process whereby you provide valuable content to prospects across various platforms, usually with a mixed media approach (audio, video, written content). This should be calculated, strategic, and measurable.

Content marketing can include any or all of the following: blog posts, articles, helpful guides, video tutorials, photos, graphics, webinars, your lead magnet, and more. All must include a call to action to get your super helpful lead magnet in exchange for their email address.

As I mentioned in the social section, having a free vs. paid content strategy is key. You'll suffer without a plan here. I also recommend batch producing content, regardless of the medium.

Your social media strategy ties in directly with your content marketing strategy. The social strategy should be informed by your content strategy, but should also include organic, unplanned interaction. Schedule those premeditated social interactions using Buffer or Edgar, as mentioned before.

Unless your membership is highly visual and your content sharing consists mainly of pictures and short videos, you need to decide which and how much written content you're going to put in front of the paywall. The easiest path to successfully producing free, ongoing written content is to strip down content from your paid membership and release it for free. Callie Willows of [The Membership Geeks](#) recommends leaving in the "what" and the "why" parts of your content, while removing the "how." You want your prospective members to see you as the expert in your field, while yearning for more – which of course, is what's within your paid membership.

An alternative is to have a mix of things like helpful guides, short courses, video tutorials, evergreen webinars, and so on, that you promote on a fixed schedule through your social channels and to your email list. This content does not need to align with exactly what you're teaching behind the paywall at the time, but naturally needs to have a high relevance to the problem people come to your membership site to solve. The trick here is making sure that content doesn't get stale. You still need to update those shelf-stable content pieces a few times per year.

Shorter content, like blog posts, articles, and very short videos, should not be gated in any way (you should not require a site visitor's email address for access). These pieces should always include two things: links to other similar content you've produced and a call to action to download your lead magnet.

More complex, higher-value content, like courses, in-depth guides, and evergreen webinars should be gated – require an email address for access if you're offering them for free at all.

## Guest blogging

Guest blogging ties in directly with your influencer and content marketing strategies. Offering to write a guest blog post for an influencer, again, after you've followed the influencer relationship steps outlined in the sections previous, while including some samples of your work, is an effective approach to begin audience sharing. The influencer likely feels the same constant content production burden as you. Having a trusted partner (you!) fill that need for a brief time can be very helpful.

If you're a decent writer and can provide clear value to the influencer's audience, you should be a shoe-in for a guest post. And if not now, in the future.

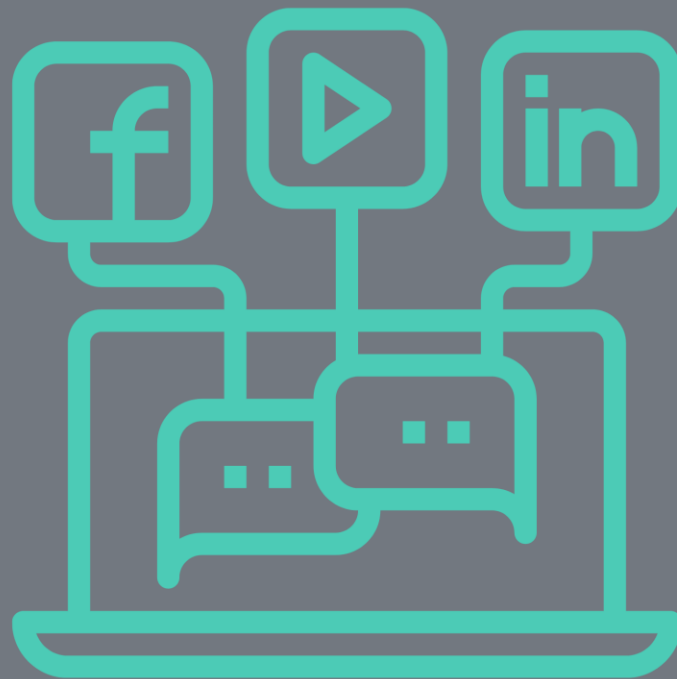
You should guest blog on sites that your target audience frequently visits. When you do this, always include a CTA (call to action), like downloading your lead magnet – the contents of

which are both desired by and valuable to the site's readership. You're highly unlikely to recognize any kind of measurable return on a guest blog post without a call to action. Your goal should be to get as many readers to your email list, and therefore into your sales funnel as possible as a direct result of your guest post. Writing a series of 3 posts on one topic that directly ties to your membership *and* is of high value to the influencer's audience will give you additional exposure to that audience and further ease the influencer's burden to produce content.

**Make sure you promote your guest post to your audience and encourage your tribe to follow the influencer if they don't already. Small actions like this build social capital and as a membership site owner social capital comes in handy for all number of collaborations and favors. Get some!**



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## Chapter 2: Social

The Big 6 social channels: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn

Pick 1 or 2 channels where your target audience lives and where you enjoy interacting. Participate on those channels 5 days a week. 80% of what you say should be helpful, useful, and/or fun for your audience, with only 20% being promotional. So, 1 out of 5 social media actions should be "salesy," that's it. No more, no less.

Your social strategy should tie in seamlessly with your content marketing strategy. For example, if you have a monthly topic or theme within your membership, your content marketing (remember you need a free vs. paid content strategy to make this work) should also align with that monthly theme. And not surprisingly, your social media strategy should promote and relate to the free content you're releasing that month. Don't reinvent the wheel. Streamline your content marketing and social strategies by piggybacking on what you're doing behind the paywall with your paying members.

Facebook is a slam dunk for paid advertising for most membership sites as there are 2.3 billion users and infinite customizations are allowed, but it's not necessarily the best place for your free social efforts unless you have an established Facebook Group.

I won't take a deep dive into the pros and cons of each medium, as that's beyond the scope of this guide. However, we recommend Instagram, Pinterest, and/or YouTube if your membership centers around highly visual instruction, and both Twitter and LinkedIn if your membership is B2B (business to business).

Using a social media scheduler, like Buffer or Edgar, will help you batch your social shares and alleviate the burden of having to show up on that social platform every single day. That being said, you should show up often and engage with those who are listening, but it's likely unreasonable to add daily social engagement to everything else on your plate as a membership site owner.

Your once-weekly promotional, more salesy, interaction on social media should absolutely include a call to action (CTA) that matches the step your audience on each platform might be ready to take towards joining your membership. That can include entering a fun contest, taking a quiz, registering for a webinar, visiting your website or a specific landing page, or downloading your lead magnet.

When you require an email address for a piece of content, that piece of content serves as what's called a lead magnet. A lead magnet is something of high relevance and value you provide to your prospect in exchange for their email address. The person who puts in their email address should immediately receive the promised content via email and be added to your email list. But don't just let them be on your email address to receive the occasional newsletter email or similar. Instead, have a strategy in place for converting that new lead into a paying member of your site! You achieve this by preloading a lead nurturing email sequence that automatically kicks off when someone downloads your lead magnet. And yes, this is time-consuming work, but this is the best set-and-forget sales tool at your disposal. Do it once, and review your nurture email sequence every six months.

The overarching goal with your social CTAs is to get a prospect's email address so they start receiving your automated nurture email sequence. As with all marketing, social engagement should be intentional, contextually appropriate, and measurable. If you aren't armed with proper

information on click-throughs, conversions, likes, shares, retweets, lead captures, etc., you might be wasting your time. Are you?

To learn more about Facebook Live, grab [Hubspot's Ultimate Guide here](#).

## Organic influencer marketing

Partnering with those who have the attention of a critical mass of your target audience is the fastest path to growth for a membership site. You can try to orchestrate this organically, or go straight to trying to pay for it.

For the purposes of membership sites, the term "influencer" is someone who has amassed a large, loyal, and engaged following online because they are the expert in their field, or just super funny/interesting/etc. and people like to be around them.

Engagement is the key metric to look for when seeking out influencers in your field. Some people have tens of thousands or more followers, but that means nothing if the majority of them ignore and are disengaged from the influencer.

We've all seen cases of *paid* influencer marketing when celebrities are hired to be the spokesperson for a certain brand. Bootstrappers and entrepreneurs have taken that concept and applied it to niche markets.

Odds are, there are influencers in your industry: Who has written a book about your membership topic? Who hosts conferences for your target audience? What are the top 3 blogs, podcasts, YouTube channels your audience pays attention to? Those are your influencers. You need to identify, find, and start to be helpful to them.

Here's how to put your best foot forward so that, over time, you can forge genuine relationships with influencers to work toward mutually beneficial, collaborative projects.

Providing value to your industry's influencers by being kind and helpful is the right way to get on their radars. Your overarching goal with this marketing channel is to first establish genuine relationships (*to make a friend, be a friend*) with said influencers – THEN in due time, work towards creating mutually beneficial ways to reach each other's audiences. Treat these relationships with kid gloves. Be careful, thoughtful, and mindful that these influencers often hold the power to influence the purchase decisions of their audience. You want that working in your favor, not against you.

You start being a helpful person by consistently doing things like: engaging with them on social media (retweets, likes, comments, etc.), reviewing their book(s) on Amazon, leaving a review for their podcast on iTunes, consistently leaving valuable comments on their blog posts, sharing their content with your audience and tagging them on various social channels with a quick thank you, and so on. Get these kinds of activities on your calendar as a recurring event so your organic influencer strategy stays on track.

If you send an email or make an initial outreach on social media to introduce yourself, it's smart to have a quote from the influencer from a blog post, podcast interview, or recent speaking gig with some insightful comment from you on how their advice/expertise helped you and/or ask a follow up question. This shows you've done your homework and aren't just comin' in hot out of the blue with an agenda to execute. Then say you've been a long-time fan of their work

(because you've been following and being helpful to them for some time now, right?), you've shared their content with your audience multiple times, and you're in the same industry and thought it might be useful to connect. Next, offer to introduce them to anyone in your network that might benefit them (great if you have some specific people in mind you're certain they're not already buddies with). It's key that you don't ask for anything in this initial outreach. If they respond favorably, move forward slowly and steadily and keep providing value to this person. Work at their pace, but don't be afraid to ask for collaborations as it makes sense.

If your working relationship progresses, it should be natural to share each other's content when relevant, be on each other's podcasts, cross promote services, bundle services for special offers, and pursue other creative collaborations for audience sharing.

If your organic influencer efforts come up short, or you are low on time, don't fret, you can try for *paid* influencer marketing instead!

## Paid influencer marketing

Just as with organic influencer marketing, you'll first need to identify the influencers in your industry, but you can short circuit the process by approaching them about paid promotional opportunities.

Recognized influencers might have a media kit of sorts on their website if they've done paid influencer marketing for others in the past. If you're not certain they've been paid for collaborations or access to their audience in the past, you might need to first see if they would even consider it. Regardless, you're better off if you've followed the relationship-building steps outlined in the previous section on organic influencer marketing so you're on their radar before you make that inquiry.

Examples of paid influencers opportunities could include: a sponsored email to their list, a sponsored blog post, a guest spot on their podcast, paying them to be a guest on a webinar, paying to interview them, paying them to speak at your conference or event, or anything else that makes sense in your space.

**Borrowing someone else's audience is the fastest and often least expensive path to growth. Don't overlook the power influencer marketing can have on your marketing and acquisition strategy.**

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## **Chapter 3: Audio**

Starting your own podcast is a significant undertaking and your ability to follow through with it week after week should be carefully considered before committing.

Many membership site owners struggle with the decision to start one or not because just like your SEO strategy, it's a marathon, not a sprint. The podcast market is saturated at this point, but if you go narrow and deep within your niche, you're likely to gain a critical mass of followers who are qualified prospects for your membership site over time.

Creating your own podcast is also one of the best ways to open doors to influencers and to become one yourself!

But, you need to make a 12-18 month commitment, releasing 1-2 podcasts per week, to give this marketing channel a fair shot. It's almost the polar opposite of running a quick Facebook campaign that's easily measured after a short period of time. And just as with any other type of content, I recommend batch recording episodes, 4-10 in one sitting, so you're not burdened every week, or multiple times a week to produce an episode.

Podcasting is one of the most personal ways you can connect with your prospects at any kind of scale – at times, even more so than the written word. Handle your audience with care. Be empathetic and show that you truly understand their pain and have a way to solve it: your membership!

The topics you cover in your podcast should appeal to people who have the potential to become power users on your membership site. No one else matters. Just like with your other marketing efforts, casting a wide net will attract unqualified prospects who will clog up your email list, or worse, churn out very early. Again, going narrow and deep within your niche is vital to success.

Don't fool yourself into thinking that the number of episode downloads is the most important metric you need to track, either. The questions you should be asking yourself to determine success include: Are my listeners following my CTA and getting into my marketing funnel? Are new members citing my podcast as a reason they joined or where they first heard about me? Is the authority I'm building through my podcast helping me build relationships and credibility with influencers in my space? Am I effectively using my podcast to network with others by having relevant guests on my show?

Promote your podcast to your email list, current members, through social channels, and influencers. A podcast should be a thoughtful part of your content marketing strategy, though because it's such an undertaking, it deserves a category of its own on my top 21 list.

Hosting your own podcast can be a powerful tool in your marketing mix. But don't start unless you can fulfill the commitment to see it through. Luckily, the next best thing to hosting your own podcast is to have a consistent presence as a guest on other peoples' podcasts.

## Be a podcast guest

The same principles of guest blogging can be applied here pretty seamlessly. Those who have committed to hosting their own podcasts are faced with the same content production burden as bloggers. Reaching out to the right hosts with the right approach could land you a handful of great guest spots and ease the content production burden of the host.

And, if you do have your own podcast, being a guest on other podcasts will amplify the results you get with your own. After all, people who listen to podcasts, listen to...podcasts.

But, whether you have your own show or not, always include a CTA when you have a guest spot. CTAs could be to download your lead magnet, a special offer toward your membership, a quick consultation, or anything else that's relevant to your site. If you have your own podcast, certainly invite listeners of the podcast(s) where you are a guest to subscribe to yours as well.

Start by identifying a list of podcasts where you would be able to provide value and insight to the subscribers. These will likely be industry influencers' podcasts whose audience probably resembles your target audience. Guest podcasting can and should be part of your organic influencer marketing strategy.

Don't make the mistake of reaching out to the hosts with 100,000 subscribers first. Start small, get some experience and build a podcast resume of sorts, then start working your way up the influencer ladder.

Your outreach email to a host should include some kudos to them, credentials for you (in a non-braggadocious way), examples of other podcasts you've been on and/or links to your own blog posts, YouTube channel, etc., and perhaps some topics you'd be great to speak about in the interview.

Don't give up when you get rejections. If you get shut down by a key influencer in your field the first, second, or third time, refer back to the organic influencer section here to try to build social capital with them before trying again.

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## Chapter 4: Face-to-face



Creative marketing opportunities abound at trade shows and industry conferences: pay for a booth, buy a sponsorship through the organizer, host a spin-off event in conjunction with the show/conference, and more.

If you are lucky enough that someone else in your industry is organizing an annual conference where your target audience comes together, you need to be there.

Relative to hosting your own event, attending a conference that someone else is putting on is like hitting the easy button. BUT, if you just show up, sans strategy, you might as well stay home.

There are often conference/event/trade show sponsorships available for purchase, booths, and other opportunities to get amplified exposure to attendees over what you can accomplish on a one-to-one basis. The Holy Grail of event engagement at someone else's event is to be a speaker. I'll address speaking engagements a bit later, but as uncomfortable as it might be at first, public speaking in front of your target audience is as good as gold. It's a fast path to trust and authority, provided your speech is engaging, valuable, and relatable.

Assess sponsorship opportunities in the same way you would with any paid advertising. It should be measurable, and that's largely on you with an event sponsorship. Your presence at the event, brand experience you create, and call to action will likely determine your success or lack thereof.

Your event strategy needs to include pre-event prep, an on-site plan, and a follow up sequence. This goes for whether or not you have a paid sponsorship, though it will likely be significantly easier if you have one.

**Prep:** If you can get access and exposure to the list of attendees before the event you can move them through the sales pipeline faster. If you're a sponsor, ask the organizers how to fully leverage the sponsorship. Ask for more than what is included in the sponsorship package if you can think of a creative way to provide value to attendees and make the organizer look good.

If you don't have a sponsorship and you're not an influencer in your space, you're unlikely to get the attention of the organizers in any kind of meaningful way. Circumvent this by getting on Twitter and Instagram and use the corresponding event hashtag to try and find others who are coming. Get to know these folks and consider hosting a happy hour, meal, or off site mini-workshop in the days and hours surrounding the main event.

**The day of:** Sponsor or not, figure out a way to capture leads. You can definitely do this on a one-to-one basis by providing a relevant resource or offer to an interested prospect in exchange for contact information or permission to connect with them on social media. Read the room and don't be pushy or salesy. If you can help someone, tell them you think you can and ask for permission to email them. Taking a second to write a quick note about each person so you can send a contextual follow-up is going to set you head and shoulders above those with generic follow-up emails completely lacking personal details.

Track the event hashtag on social media during and after the event, and use it yourself. That's a free way to amplify your presence and make you more visible to attendees. This is also a great way to track down prospects and influencers during and after the event.

If you do have a booth at a conference, you need a way to stand out. I'm no expert here, but get on Pinterest and look for some creative inspiration. Get noticed and if your industry lends itself to a little lighthearted fun, then play that up. One way to do this is to have a themed booth and have employees or helpers dress a certain way. One thing I've seen done successfully is to have employees walking around and asking people if they'd like to be invited to an exclusive club/restaurant for cocktails after the event. They then have to go to your booth to hear more about your offering and sign up (lead capture) to get an invite. If you do this, you need to have a fun bunch running your booth – people that your prospects actually want to spend time having drinks with. Rent out a popular bar or room in a restaurant in town and pay the tab at the end of the night. Something like this creates a little buzz (no pun intended) at the event, allows prospects to have a positive experience with your brand, and essentially serves as an in-person lead magnet.

**Follow up:** All your prep and on-site work will go to waste if you drop the ball on the follow-up strategy. Remember, lead capture during the event is key, otherwise you won't have many people to follow up with. Oops. The day after the event, write an individual email including the personal details you made note of when you met them (you did that, right?) and make a connection with them on their favorite social media outlet for the one-two punch. Don't wait around on this. You need to capitalize on event hype and momentum and if you put this off for a week, you've likely missed the boat. After the personalized email, trigger the automated drip sequence you wrote before the event, from your email provider (you got permission to email them, too, right?) and move them through the sales pipeline just as you would someone who visited your website. But, you've met this person in the flesh, so your calls to action (CTAs) should be of more consequence (attend a value-packed webinar, start trial, buy) than someone who is just starting your drip sequence after picking up the lead magnet on your site.

If you are only able to hand out cards and not capture names and contact info for some reason, create a landing page with a special lead magnet offer just for conference attendees. Have a special batch of business cards made that include the landing page URL and a quick description of the amazing free resource you've created just for them on it. Then have your email capture form on that landing page in exchange for the download and kick off an automated nurture sequence to follow.

**There's a hundred ways to work this, but the main takeaway is that you need a pre, during, and post event strategy that's measurable.**

## Webinars

A webinar is a 45-90 minute value-forward online seminar that can be shown live to a web-based audience or pre-recorded and consumed on demand.

Webinars can be great top-of-funnel sources and email list building tools, but can also be used toward the end of a marketing funnel to ask for the sale.

Webinars can be produced yourself as a one-off, produced in a series called a summit with or without guests, or you can be a guest on someone else's. In any case, they can and should be leveraged to display your expertise and build authority and trust in your industry space. You can use them one time or produce evergreen webinars – the contents of which should be applicable for the next 12-24 months.

If you run a closed model with your membership (meaning you only open the site to new members a few times per year), a single webinar or summit can be an excellent closing tactic. I would recommend offering this kind of webinar live and hinting at a very special, exclusive, time-limited offer in your marketing materials that will only be offered to live attendees at the end of the webinar – not those who watch the replay. Still send the webinar replay to those who don't attend live, but you can increase your live attendance and closing ratio if your audience knows something special is happening at the end.

Hosting a summit is one of the best moves you can make to become an authority/influencer. You must have a sizable email list to attract other industry experts as guests, but if you can pull this off, your efforts will be rewarded. This is a lot of work, so I wouldn't recommend doing it unless you can commit the time necessary to get your technology, summit promotion, guests, content planning, scheduling, and follow-up hashed out.

Being a guest on someone else's webinar and inviting your audience to attend is the perfect way to dip your toe in the water and get comfortable on camera without putting forth all the effort to host your own. If you are working with others on cross-promotions and have an organic influencer strategy in place, you're more likely to be top of mind on the guest list for those who are hosting webinars and summits.

Much like fully leveraging a conference or industry event, having a pre-webinar promotional strategy and follow-up plan is vital.

Since webinars and summits are such a wealth of information to your target audience (not to mention a ton of work on your part), make sure you are repurposing the content from the webinar: turn it into a blog post series, ebook, podcast or podcast series, YouTube videos, a lead magnet, and so on.

**The key factor to remember whether you are hosting or a guest is to provide an inordinate amount of value to webinar attendees. This isn't the time to hold back your secret sauce – it's the time to prove you have the secret sauce and that there's plenty more where that came from behind your membership paywall.**

## In-person events or meetups

In-person events and meetups can consist of any of the following: hosting happy hours, in-person classes/lessons, workshops, sponsorship of in-person events in cities where a critical mass of your members live, and anything else where you can get people together in real life.

Events can be free or paid, educational in nature, or just good fun for community-building.

Most membership sites we work with have an online community component as part of their membership. After all, a community is one of the biggest differentiators between a membership and a course. If you can gather your community in person and put on an event that your members (and prospective members) enjoy and then rave about online, you're going to increase sales, cLTV, conversion rates, and the strength of your online community.

These kinds of events are a great place for current and prospective members to mingle and chat. Let your current members do the "selling" for you to prospects through casual conversation. If a handful of your current members value your membership enough to show up somewhere in the flesh, talking about your membership will come up naturally in conversation.

As with industry conferences and trade shows, you must prepare ahead of time, make the actual event live up to the hype, and have a follow up strategy. Your prep and follow up will depend on the type of event you're holding.

If it's a workshop, you're likely charging people to attend, and will need to prepare marketing materials, and then the workshop details themselves (workbooks, handouts, a slide deck, your presentation, guest speakers/instructors). Your follow up should include a survey of attendees, bonus materials, and a special offer for something else. If you've just met with someone in person and earned their trust, leverage that momentum into relevant upsell opportunities.

If you are hosting a happy hour, little prep work should be necessary. Focus on choosing a great venue, providing appetizers and maybe drinks, and getting people there. Once you're there, engage with everyone in attendance and make sure you don't have anyone awkwardly left out. Asking current members to bring a like-minded friend along is an easy way to grow your attendance as well.

And while a happy hour is the last place to be salesy, if you're inviting prospective members, have a subtle way of making sure you can follow up with them. Your lead capture could be entry into a contest for a free membership, some swag, etc., or something more subtle like handing out cards to prospects with a special promo code on them.

Regardless of the type of event, ensure you have a plan for lead capture and follow up for prospects in attendance. And just as your membership marketing materials must match what the paying members actually get behind the paywall, your event promotion must match what you're able to deliver in person or else you risk being badmouthed online. Create raving fans of your events rather than naysayers so you can successfully hold events in the future. This is a perfect time to harness the underpromise, overdeliver principle.

## Speaking engagements

Perhaps this is even more fear-inducing than direct sales for some of us, but it's enormously impactful when done well, recorded, and fully leveraged.

If you're new to public speaking, that's okay. Things like blogging, guest podcasting, hosting or being a guest on webinars, creating videos, etc., are all great preparation for public speaking. And you don't have to shoot for the moon when you're just starting out. Find a local business association and make a presentation there or teach an in person workshop to a small group. You can even go to a nearby town where you don't know anyone to make a presentation if you really want to take the pressure off.

Start small, and as your comfort and skill set improves, up level to a bigger gig. Apply to teach breakout sessions at conferences, host an unofficial breakout session before or after someone else's event (in a non-shady way of course).

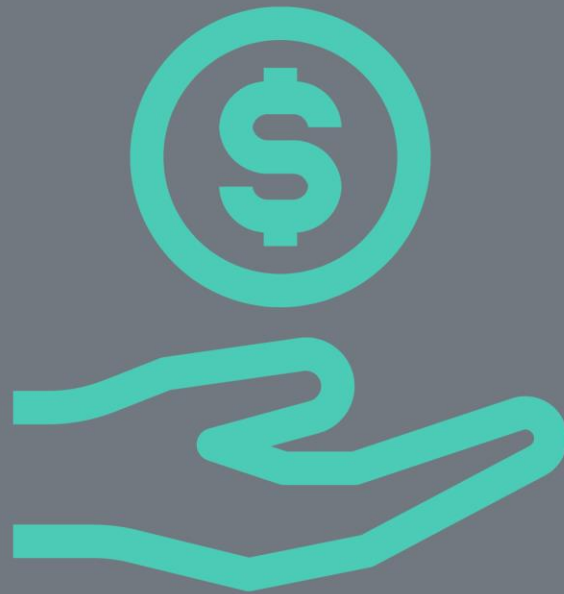
Once you've done those things successfully, start to harness your organic influencer, guest blogging/podcasting/webinar hosting strategies to move further up the speaking ladder. If you're privy to relevant speaking opportunities because you have a strong network and have put in the time to build social capital within that network, you're many times more likely to be considered for a speaker slot, even if you're not particularly well known yet.

Higher profile speaking gigs are on par with writing your own book, hosting a conference, or even a summit with other industry experts in terms of reach and influence.

No matter the size of the speaking gig, fully leverage your presentation by repurposing it for other mediums. First make sure you're able to record solid quality video of your talk or presentation. Then post your video to your own site both behind and in front of the paywall. Post it on YouTube, use the content for a blog post series, podcast topic, to seed discussion within your free and paid communities, and include an embedded video on the "About" or "Resources" tab on your website.

**Not to mention, use the video recording to apply for other speaking gigs. Once you've proven yourself as a valuable speaker and market yourself accordingly using recorded video of your presentation and some social proof (positive feedback you received from attendees), your public speaking life will get a whole lot easier.**

# 21 marketing channels for membership sites



## Chapter 5: Sales and advertising

Referrals are the warmest leads you can get. Unlike the other acquisition channels discussed here, referrals are something everyone should be asking for without exception.

Don't ask the wrong members for referrals; instead ask for them from your current power users! Remember, your power users are those who are most engaged in your membership, spend the most money with you, and are your top brand evangelists.

It's imperative that you ask for referrals from power users, rather than those who have become unengaged and in desperate need of some TLC. Sending the right message at the right time to the right members is key to success at every level of running your membership – including asking for favors, like referrals, reviews, and networking introductions.

## Paid advertising

Paid advertising can be just about anything, but most common opportunities for membership sites include: Google AdWords, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, within an influencer's channels (sponsored emails, podcasts, via social, etc.), paid content, a traditional advertisement in an industry publication, and anywhere else someone will take your money in exchange for promotion.

Paid advertising should be the easiest channel to track. If you can't track the success of anything you're paying for, I can't imagine a circumstance in which you should do it. If you're a giant company, first of all, you're not reading this, but you might purchase ads strictly for brand awareness. If you're under \$5 million ARR, you shouldn't be advertising for brand awareness – you should be advertising for trackable conversions.

At the same time, it's important that you have **realistic expectations** of what paid advertising will do for you. If you find a silver bullet acquisition channel that is profitable and never runs dry, you should play the lottery, too. For the rest of us, we're hoping to land on 2-4 acquisition channels that are profitable and reliable for a period of 6+ months. Expect to have to pivot your marketing approach from time to time.

If your advertisement is the first exposure your prospect has to your membership offering, your CTA cannot and should not be asking them to start paying for your membership.

The same principles apply in your marketing outreach as they do in your nurture sequence (which is the pre-loaded series of emails someone receives over time after downloading your lead magnet): **make the right ask to the right person at the right time.**

If you ask for too much or too little at the wrong time, the would-be qualified lead might ignore you forever because you came on too strong, or your offer just wasn't compelling enough to warrant action on their part. Ever asked someone to marry you on the first date? How'd that go for ya? Or the converse of that, ever had sparks fly on a first date and then not call them for 3 weeks? Your ad must attract your target audience by providing the right offer at the right time.

**To test paid advertising, I recommend starting with Facebook ads.** Their platform offers an unbelievably broad reach, is affordable to try, and provides a level of customization that is virtually unmatched by any competitor with a similar pool of people (2.3 billion) for the price. Not to mention, their tracking data dials in on exactly how much value, in real dollars and cents, your advertising campaign was worth. All you have to do is log in to Facebook Ad Manager and check; no math required.

Install the [Facebook Pixel](#) on your site if you haven't already and set up a 3 month, budget-limited, retargeting campaign. Retargeting means showing advertisements to those who have been to your website and interacted with your brand on some level. You can expect a higher ROI (return on investment) by showing ads to those who have already visited your website and likely have a general idea of who you are and how you might help them, rather than an advertisement on Facebook being their first exposure to your brand. Do not show the same ads to the same people over and over and over again during the 3 month test period. Test a handful of ads – both video and static – and assess the results of each.

[Here's a great guide](#) on getting started with Facebook ads.

## PR (Public Relations)

One way to leverage PR in your membership is to create a newsworthy story about yourself, your business, a product launch, event, partnership with a charity, etc. and then work with influencers and highly relevant publications to distribute that story. This can be something you pay for, or if your story is newsworthy enough, perhaps you can get it included in some publications at no cost.

Getting a well-known person from a particular publication to interview you and publish it is awesome, too, and in some cases even better.

Bear in mind, publications are typically more amenable to include excellent content from you if you are also a paid advertiser.

If you have put in the time to build relationships with the influencers who run the publications you're targeting for PR, your chances of cooperation and perhaps even collaboration are far greater than going in cold.

For small to mid sized businesses, content marketing is highly intertwined with PR at this point. The lines are pretty fuzzy on where content marketing begins and PR ends; influencer marketing is also tied in here as well.

But by and large, PR is a tool that large companies use to sway public opinion. There are huge agencies that are highly skilled at this, and that's just not what we're going for with the vast majority of membership businesses.

## Cross promotions

To run a cross-promotion, identify a handful of non-competing organizations that are targeting the same audience as you, and work with them to cross promote each other's businesses.

What other products or services does your target audience buy? Brainstorm a quick list of tangential products and services to the one you offer. Spend a few minutes on Google searching for small businesses who sell those tangential offerings. Identify around 6 whose target audience very likely matches yours *and* that you are confident you can offer value to.

Don't approach another business owner and ask for a cross promotion if you can't bring a boatload of value to the table yourself. This has to be mutually beneficial and the other business



owner must clearly see the value proposition for their own business in order to give you the time of day.

If you are running a membership to teach email marketing, partner with someone who teaches, runs a membership, or sells a course on social media marketing, Facebook marketing or similar.

If you teach any sort of hands-on skill or craft, partner with online stores who sell supplies to your members.

If your membership teaches a paleo lifestyle, partner with a paleo meal kit delivery service.

Bundles, reciprocal discounts, and ongoing reciprocal promotion (usually with an affiliate program) are three ways to approach cross-promotions.

Bundling products and/or services for a limited amount of time for holidays, Black Friday, or whenever makes sense for what you're offering is a relatively low risk, low effort way to begin and test a cross-promotional relationship.

Offering a discount to your cross promotional partner's business when someone signs up for your membership is great, too. Just make sure your promo partner is making a similar offer when someone purchases from them. This is a one time set and forget, highly trackable promotion provided you are using a promo code.

You can formalize a cross-promotional partnership by instituting an affiliate relationship as well. I'll touch on this in more detail a bit later, but basically you get a cut of the business you send their way and vice versa.

## Direct sales

Perhaps everyone's least favorite, but depending on the size and stage of your membership site, direct, or one-to-one, selling is often a necessary evil to get traction when you're starting out.

Direct sales involves seeking out prospects on a small scale, often a one-to-one basis, and approaching them directly (first with value!) to start the conversation.

If you do find it necessary to sell directly, you're likely just starting out and trying to get some traction, or you're selling a B2B (business to business) membership or subscription at a high enough price point to justify the time and effort required to close the deal.

LinkedIn's Sales Navigator is an absolutely necessary subscription to have if you're selling this way. There's not another business database on the planet as robust and accessible as this.

A one-to-one B2B outreach strategy, including 7-12 multi-platform touches, over a set period of time is necessary to make this work. You are going to need to offer a lot of personalized value to your prospects through various platforms (email, social, phone, video, sometimes direct mail) and be able to pivot quickly as necessary to even get on their radar.

A haphazard approach just isn't going to cut it. A sales strategy like this is nuanced and beyond the scope of this guide.

## Affiliate programs

An affiliate program means you are giving 10-30% of a member's monthly or annual fee in perpetuity (until the member cancels) to someone else in exchange for a directly attributable referral.

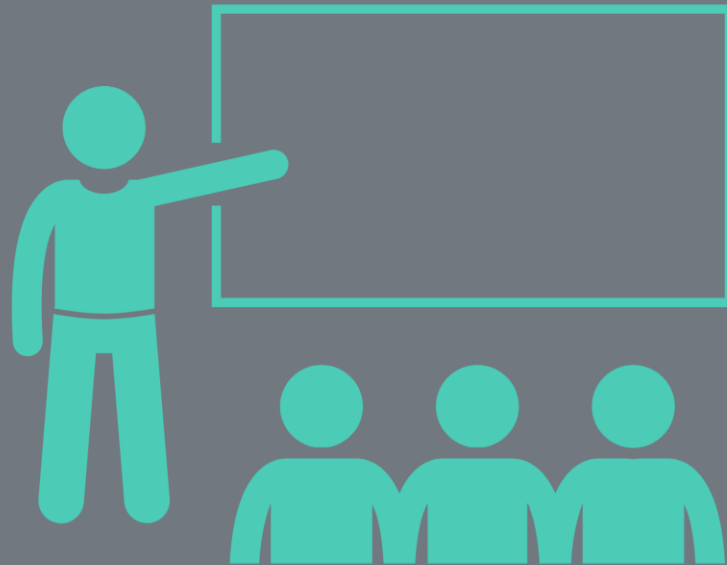
Offering affiliate programs to influencers and those organizations that would qualify for a cross-promotion can be a worthy incentive for someone to encourage their audience to sign up for your membership.

It's imperative to factor the affiliate fee into your CAC (customer acquisition cost) and see how it stacks up to other marketing channels to see if this is right for you (a.k.a. actually profitable). Remember the equation:  $cLTV - CAC$ . In other words, is what you're making from a member over the lifetime of their time on your site *more* than what you paid in marketing expense and any associated sales commissions to acquire them? If so, how does your affiliate program stack up to other acquisition channels in terms of profitability?

A second option you could experiment with is paying a larger, one-time upfront affiliate commission. This can be a bit risky, but if your site is well established and you have a solid grasp on your customer lifetime value, this can be a profitable approach. It can be a better incentive for affiliates (they know exactly what they'll make per referral), and if you have a good handle on your LTV you can ultimately see a larger long-term profit. But, you've got to have the cash on hand to make this work, since that affiliate fee will be higher than what a new member pays you for the first few months.

A middle-of-the-road, slightly less risky affiliate option is to pay your affiliate a high percentage of the member's monthly fee, say 50-75%, for the first 3 months of their membership. That way, you're not out any cash up front and the affiliate shares the risk with you more equitably. If they send a member your way that's not actually a good fit for what your membership provides, they're going to churn early and the affiliate misses out on their commission.

# 21 marketing channels for membership sites



## Chapter 6: Thought leadership

Over time, creating a free yet robust online community can have the potential to bring in all the top of funnel leads you'll ever need. Sound too good to be true? It might be. This is a tricky one, as you don't want so much value in the free community that your non-paying participants have no incentive to join your paid membership community.

And if there is already a thriving, free community in your industry, do you have the unique value proposition to draw people away from the place they're already comfortable participating in – where they know people and have a reputation – to join yours?

If so, power to ya. If not, think about how you can come alongside that existing thriving community and become a valued participant. More on that in a moment.

Two common platforms for creating a free community are Facebook Groups and discussion forums. If you go with Facebook, we recommend a closed Facebook Group where non participants can see that the group exists, but can't participate without being approved by the group's organizer. If you have a completely open group, the discussions that happen often revolve around the lowest common denominator and devolve quickly. You want to create a welcoming, friendly environment so people actually participate, just like within your paid membership. Facebook also offers completely hidden "secret", invite only groups, but you don't want this as you're using it for a top of funnel source and absolutely need to be discoverable.

The biggest pitfall with Facebook is that you're essentially playing in someone else's sandbox. If they change the rules, as they've done in the past, your community can vanish overnight. Having more control and assuming less risk is important, considering the time and effort it requires to build such a community.

A free to join discussion forum is also a viable community option. See if the forum software you're using within your membership allows you to create a spin-off community in front of the paywall.

Either way, clearly post community rules and be prepared to moderate discussion as needed. If you have moderators within your paid community, expand their territory to include patrolling the free community as well.

Once again, I strongly recommend creating a formalized free vs. paid content strategy. Once you have one, you can seed discussion in your free community with your free content and thereby promote your paid membership in a non-pushy way.

Regardless of where you host a free community, you're going to need to put a lot of time into participating there, especially in the beginning. You need to establish yourself as the leader of the group and the industry expert. Provide a lot of value up front and answer questions thoroughly and promptly.

However, as time goes on, assuming you have a critical mass of participants, you should pull your participation in the free group back. For instance, let your group know you'll be around on Tuesdays and Fridays to answer questions and participate. If they want to talk to you sooner, you're available every day in your paid membership community forum.

You also need to leave less detailed answers to questions as time goes on. Provide answers, by all means, but don't give away the *full* answer as you would to a paying member. Give a taste and then point the free community member toward your paid membership where they can

get the entire answer to that question and many more. It's also helpful if you can point to content within your membership that answers specific questions posed in your free group.

As with any acquisition channel, you need a way to capture leads and get prospects into your marketing funnel, aka download your lead magnet and start receiving your email nurture sequence. Don't skip this step.

Also make sure you're regularly promoting your paid membership within your free community. Don't be pushy, obnoxious, or in-your-face about it, but putting links to all of your free content (which of course have lead magnet opt-ins scattered throughout the piece), podcast episodes, announcements of additions to your paid membership, and special promotions to help drive conversions.

Only create a free community after very careful consideration on your part. It's a long term play, much like hosting your own podcast, but if you can get momentum, it's off to the races toward your paid membership!

## Become a leader in existing communities

If there are one or more free online communities dedicated to your area of expertise, you could join there and regularly contribute, help others, and provide value, rather than reinventing the wheel by starting your own competing community.

This could be thought of as an extension of your social strategy and participation should be included as part of your weekly process. In other words, you should have a checklist of social media interactions you aim to have over the course of a week. Make participating in these free communities one of the line items on that list. Get it on your calendar and stick with it, because if your participation is spotty, you're wasting your time as you won't get noticed or stand out in a meaningful way.

Over time if you're consistent with this, you can build up a reputation as an expert who people will pay attention to and seek out within those free communities.

Don't hear me say that you should go and bombard someone else's community with spammy, salesy junk. That will get you a one-way ticket to the exit courtesy of the group's organizer. Follow their rules, only promote your membership as allowed, and as with your organic influencer strategy, goal #1 is to be a helpful person who provides a lot of value to the community.

## Reddit and Quora

Reddit and Quora are two often overlooked gems that serve as a catch-all for anyone looking for anything online. I'd be flabbergasted if you searched those two sites and found nothing relating to your membership topic.

Answering questions on Quora and Reddit that pertain to your membership space creates the gift that keeps on giving. If you are a helpful resource on those sites, people will find your responses over and over again.

You can add participation on these sites to your social media strategy checklist as well. Even if you only check these sites once per month or once per quarter, establish some amount of presence if your industry topic is discussed on either site. Spend an hour searching those sites for questions you can answer or threads you can add something of value to. If you can write up a dozen replies in that hour, you've planted little seeds that will eventually produce fruit as those questions and threads get referenced time and time again in the future.

When you're on these sites, remember one of my golden rules of marketing: first be helpful, then be even more helpful, then be so unbelievably helpful by providing so much value that there's no other option but for your target audience to pay you money for more of that sweet, sweet value.

# 21 marketing channels for membership sites



**Wrap up**

simple marketing tests in the coming months. Follow the steps outlined at the beginning of this guide to determine which channels are viable (both profitable & reliable) for your membership.

Effective marketing is vital to the lifeblood of your business, **but** it's not the be-all and end-all answer to long term success. First you must have a viable membership product. Then you must attract – through your smart marketing efforts – those people who have the potential to become power users. If you already know the secret sauce of what actions members take on your site to become power users, you're halfway there!

Once armed with the knowledge of what your power users love the most about your membership and the problem you solve for them, you're best poised to test marketing channels to find viable ways to bring on more members that resemble those power users.

No matter the channel, your marketing messaging should point prospects to the things about your membership site that your power users love the most. If you start by attracting those types of people in the first place, rather than casting a wide net to get as many sales as possible, you're setting yourself up for profitability and scalability. Not to mention, your members will be happier, more successful, and rave about you online!

Once you have determined 2-4 viable acquisition channels that best target people who have the potential to become power users, and you have a lead nurture sequence in place (emails + retargeting ads), all you have to do is keep those members around. Easy, right? I'm afraid not. Churn, or member cancellations, is the growth killer of all membership businesses, and in many cases, leads to their eventual demise.

According to [Harvard Business Review](#), it costs between 5 and 25 times more to acquire a new customer than to keep an existing one! That's a tough pill to swallow for someone that relies on a recurring revenue model, like you.

It's your responsibility as the site owner to track member engagement and intervene when your hard earned paying customers are slipping away and becoming unengaged. If you have the right people paying for your membership, it's your job to help them recognize the value they're paying for.

Ready to take your membership to the next level? Check out our [coaching and consulting services](#) for one-on-one insight, accountability, and everything else you need to succeed.